

# Polk Administration 1845-1849

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Polk's Early Life

James Knox Polk was born on November 2, 1795, in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. He was the oldest child of ten. When he



was a small boy, the family moved to a farm at Duck Creek, Tennessee. Polk, being a weak child, was not able to farm, so his parents saw to

it that he received an education. He graduated with honors from the University of North Carolina in 1818 with a degree in mathematics and the classics. By 1820, Polk became a lawyer in Tennessee.

## Early Politics

Polk became interested in politics early in his life and became a solid supporter of the Democrat Party. When he proposed to Sarah Childress, a wealthy and prominent Tennessean, she agreed to marry him only if he won office to the state legislature. In 1823, Polk won election and he married Sarah on January 1, 1824. While in this office, he met the greatest political influence in his life, Tennessee senator and future president Andrew Jackson. The two men became friends.

After one term in the state legislature, Polk ran for and won a seat in the House of Representatives in 1825. His debating skills and support of Andrew Jackson got him elected to the position of Speaker of the House, the leader of the House of Representatives, from 1834 to 1839. Putting the welfare of the party above his own career, he became governor of Tennessee from 1839-1841.

Unfortunately, the Whig Party gained in popularity and Polk lost re-election in 1841 and in 1843. It seemed that his political career was at an end.

1. The greatest political influence in Polk's life was... (circle one)
  - c. Sarah Childress
  - f. Andrew Jackson
  - m. George Washington
  - y. Don Baylor

## To the Presidency

At the Democratic National Convention held in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1844, Martin Van Buren was campaigning to run again for president. However, Van Buren was against the annexation<sup>1</sup> of the Republic of Texas for fear it could lead to war with Mexico. This ended Van Buren's chances for re-election to the presidency.

Remembering former president Andrew Jackson's advice to nominate James K. Polk for president, Democratic officials chose Polk. Polk became the first "dark horse" (little known) candidate for president.

James K. Polk supported Manifest Destiny—the idea that it was America's God-given right to grow across the continent to the Pacific Ocean. Polk supported annexation of Texas and Oregon territory. To oppose Polk, the Whigs ran Henry Clay who had the campaign slogan "Who is James K. Polk?" After the vote, Polk won the election 170 electoral votes to Clay's 105—it was one of the closest elections in United States history. At age 49, Polk became the youngest man up to this time to be elected president.

2. Why do you think people voted for Polk? (circle one)

- c. Henry Clay was too old
- f. Henry Clay was a dark horse
- m. James Polk supported expansion
- y. Van Buren had died

## The Polk Administration

On March 1, 1845, hours before Polk was to be inaugurated president, President Tyler signed the resolution to annex Texas—a deal that Polk had secretly helped put together. Polk turned out to be a very efficient president and one of the hardest working men to ever hold the office. He was up at daybreak and went to bed at midnight. He only spent a total of 37 days away from the White House. He had four goals as president: (1) reduce the tariff, (2) create a new national bank, (3) create a new Oregon boundary, and (4) annex California.

In 1846, he got the Walker-McKay Tariff passed that lowered import taxes. The South and West supported the reduction in taxes, but the northern manufacturing states complained. Secondly, Polk supported the Independent Treasury Act creating a new federal banking system. After President Jackson destroyed the national bank, the American economy suffered. With the passage of this new act in 1847, all federal money collected would stay in the federal treasury instead of being deposited in private state banks. This gave the federal government more control over how it spent national dollars. This system would remain in place until replaced by the Federal Reserve System in 1913.

<sup>1</sup> annexation: to take in

3. What were Polk's goals as president? (list)

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. \_\_\_\_\_
- d. \_\_\_\_\_

### Oregon Country

Another war between Britain and the United States seemed possible. The United States and Britain both claimed Oregon Country that included all or part of present-day Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and British Columbia. In the Treaty of 1818, the United States and Britain agreed to jointly occupy the territory. By the 1840s, thousands of eastern pioneers traveled on the Oregon Trail in search of good farmland and a mild climate. Americans began calling for the United States to annex most or all of Oregon Country.

Polk wanted to set a permanent boundary at the 54° 40' parallel. Britain refused and the Democrats began calling for war. Finally, in the Oregon Treaty of 1846, Britain and the United States agreed to the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel as the border. Despite avoiding a war with Britain, another war was heating up toward the south.

4. An attraction to Oregon Country for many pioneers was... (circle one)

- c. cold weather
- f. gold
- m. good farmland
- y. British protection

### The Mexican American War

At the time the United States annexed the Republic of Texas, Mexico was threatening to get Texas back. When word reached Mexico City that Texas now

belonged to the United States, Mexico reacted by calling back its ambassadors<sup>2</sup> on March 6, 1845. In addition, Mexico was a political mess with two governments fighting for control of the country. This caused Mexico to miss a payment of \$3,000,000 owed to American citizens.

Polk sent an ambassador to Mexico to offer \$25 million and to cancel the \$3 million debt in exchange for upper California and to extend the Texas border from the Nunces River to the Rio Grande River. Mexico refused. Both the United States and Mexico sent troops into the disputed Texas border area. Mexican troops attacked killing a small number of American soldiers.

On May 13, 1846, Congress declared war against Mexico. The war lasted about a year-and-a-half, ending with the American capture of Mexico City in September 1847 by General Winfield Scott. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was approved by the Senate on March 10, 1848, officially ending the Mexican-American War. The United States gave Mexico \$15 million and took upper California and the New Mexico territory.

5. After the war, the United States gained... (circle three)

- c. disputed Texas territory
- f. upper California
- m. Oregon
- y. New Mexico territory

### The Polk Legacy

It was during the Polk Administration that the United States reached the Pacific Ocean and expanded almost to its present size. With the expansion, Polk issued the Polk Doctrine that basically restated the Monroe Doctrine. Polk said that the United States would not tolerate any

European interference in the Americas. At this time, the Yucatan territory in Mexico was rebelling and threatening to join with Spain or Britain. Polk made it clear that the United States was now as powerful as Europe and that Europe had better stay out of North and South America.

Despite his successes, Polk was humorless and lacked the personality required to gain support from his peers. Whigs attacked Polk for the war saying it was all done in the name of spreading slavery. The Democratic Party failed to stand up for Polk as it was splitting apart over the slavery issue with northern Democrats on one side and southern Democrats on the other side. Polk, who refused to run for a second term, left office an unpopular president. Having suffered a grueling work schedule for four years, Polk's health deteriorated and he died on June 15, 1849, three months after leaving office.

6. The Polk Doctrine stated... (circle two)

- c. the United States was as powerful as Europe
- f. all of Mexico belonged to the United States
- m. Europe needs to stay out of North and South America
- y. Britain needed to give Canada its independence

7. The Democratic party... (circle one)

- c. rejected the Polk Doctrine
- f. accused Polk of wanting to spread slavery
- m. fell apart after the Mexican War
- y. was splitting apart over slavery

<sup>2</sup> ambassadors: people who represent their country's government in another country